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About this Course (mini-1)

This course is one in a series of distance education faculty development mini-courses. This course, Managing and Maintaining the Discussion Board for Distance Courses, cover many tips to help you successfully use the interactive nature of discussion boards.

- Overview: General discussion on the modules and the content.
- Module 1: The discussion board is the logical location to drive interaction in a distance course. It is also the location where instructors can write specific information that can benefit the entire group of students.
- Module 2: Certain elements should be included in the design of the course to set the tone and clarify expectations for the use of the discussion board in the course.
- Module 3: It is important to design initial activities for the discussion board to get students engaged in posting and using the the board.
- Module 4: Certain types of instructor responses to the discussion board can reduce the amount of posts required of instructors while maintaining adequate instructor presence.
- Conclusion: Supporting resources for your use.

Including certain written instructions and expectations in your distance course will help students understand how they should perform on the discussion board. Activities to engage students and provide practice in using the discussion board reinforce these expectations. Using certain types of responses can reduce instructor workload while maintaining adequate instructor presence to promote interaction in the distance course. It is the combination of these types of activities that make the discussion a valuable location for student learning in the distance course.

Overview

This mini-course was created to place information about the design, use, and management of discussion boards for distance courses in a single location. This course features a variety of resources and suggestions for the use of the discussion area. These are suggestions only and in no way imply a single "best" approach to the use of the discussion board area.

We encourage you to mix and match these suggestions in ways that are logical for your course and your instructional style.

Why the Discussion Board is Important

In face-to-face (F2F) courses, students and the instructor meet according to a schedule in a single location. The instructor has various instructional techniques at their disposal and a captive audience for the duration of the meeting. Three general approaches often used by instructors in F2F courses are to present content, to allow discussion about the content, and/or to immerse students in activities involving the content. Often, these and other approaches will be mixed throughout the scheduled session. Some instructors constantly explore new approaches while others feel successful with a single approach that has worked in the past.

The face-to-face classroom does have one characteristic that all distance educators should understand. Since the instructor and the students are in the same location at the same time, improvisation is very easy. If a presentation is not getting the expected results, the instructor receives cues (non-verbal and direct questions) from the students. It is relatively easy to change the presentation or the approach at a moment's notice and attempt to put across content in a different way. For students, it is easier to hedge on answers and activities because they receive cues (non-verbal and questions) from the instructor. It is the improvisational nature of face-to-face instruction that is difficult to approximate in the distance course.

It is important to realize that discussion activities in F2F courses also allow instructors to respond to one question or misconception and allow all students to benefit from that response. It is this "spoken once but heard by many" characteristic that makes F2F instruction so efficient. F2F instructors use these discussions as ways to understand what students know about a topic and what concepts need clarification. These discussions are also used as a way to bring greater interaction into the classroom.

We advocate that the discussion board is the most logical location in the distance course for similar activities. It is the location where the instructor can respond and clarify misconceptions (a type of improvisation since some student comments will prompt a response). It is the location where the instructor can probe for understanding and misunderstanding. It is also the location where "written once but read by many" activities can happen.

Many students at TWU take distance courses while holding down full time jobs. The discussion board allows these students to communicate and have a sense of involvement in the course according to their schedule. This asynchronous communication allows the students to connect with other students, the content, and you. The discussion area is the "time independent" approximation of face-to-face conversation and discussion.

Look at F2F Strategies

We believe the discussion board is the location to allow you to extend learning and thought about content beyond the static text found in your course. This text is important but it sets the stage for the work on the discussion board as well. We favor discussion board activities with planned outcomes to enrich the content presented in the course.

One of the things we encourage you to do is to analyze your face-to-face instruction some to determine a little about your instructional style. If you favor lecture-type activities with little student interaction then this will influence your choice of discussion board activities. It could be that for your approach few if any discussion activities fit into the format of the course. If your face-to-face style is heavy on discussion activities, certain activities may seem very appealing to you on the discussion board.

Once you identify the activities that appeal to you on the discussion board, design will come into play. How you frame the prompts and questions are tied to the specific outcomes you seek. The instructions you provide for how to successfully complete the assignment are essential as well.

Since we introduced the topic of face-to-face instruction above, think about the following questions:

- Do you speak with each student at some point in every face-to-face class?
- Do you expect each student to ask a question of you at some point in each class?
- Do you facilitate all large group and small group discussions in each class?

We use these questions because we have talked with faculty members who try to individually answer each post from students or believe they need to facilitate all discussions in the distance course. There are other ways to establish your instructional presence in a course and reduce the amount of instructor postings.

Connecting Discussion Board Activities to Content

We encourage you to systematically plan specific discussion board activities to meet specific learning outcomes while thinking about the types of responses that are required from you. We also encourage you to realize that all discussion activities are not created equally. Some activities will require a great deal of moderation while others require almost no active moderation. Some activities require individual responses while others can benefit from summaries. The timeline for the semester also plays into the decision-making process. For instance, it would most likely be a bad idea to create a discussion board requiring several responses to each student in the course on the same week as final exams.

Create activities that require students to think differently about the content. Create activities that require communication and collaboration on the board. Create great discussion prompts that engage students. Just don't try to do all of these things for each discussion activity. Spread the work out for the students and spread the work out for yourself.

Orient Students to the Discussion Board

It is important that you provide clear explanation on where students should access the discussion board. You tell the students exactly where they should access the discussion board. After students do this task several times, most will habitually use the access point you describe. One strategy is to use the main menu in the course management system as your access point. This means that students can access the discussion board from anywhere in the course with one click.

Example:

You will be using the discussion board throughout this course. To get to the discussion board, use the Discussion Board menu item found on the main menu to the left of the screen. This will take you to the discussion board area and you can search for the particular discussion forum that you need to complete.

You might be interested in reading [How to Orient Students to the Discussion Board](#), a resource found in [TWU ID](#), a set of resources for TWU distance educators.

Communicate the Importance of Interaction on the Discussion Board

Students need to know that you value participation on the discussion board. The quickest way to demonstrate this to many students is to include participation on the discussion board as a significant portion of your grading policy. Your task is to convince students that interaction and participation is a course requirement for success in your course. Include language throughout your course demonstrating that you value this participation and see it as important to individual and group success in the course.

Example:

To succeed in this course, you must participate on the assigned discussion forums to the quality standards outlined in the course requirements. If you notice, almost a quarter of your grade comes from your postings and responses to your classmates. In simple terms, if you fail to participate, the highest grade you can receive (assuming perfect scores on all other assignments) is a C for the course. I believe interaction and participation with others will help you understand the content and provide a fuller course experience. Don't let me down by failing to participate. I will notice!

You might be interested in reading [Socializing Students to the Discussion Board](#) or [Using Tone to Increase Interaction](#), resources found on [TWU ID](#), a set of resources for TWU distance educators.

Communicate the Posting Procedures

You should clearly indicate the number of required postings so students will understand exactly what they need to do. You should also indicate any conventions you establish for posting (e.g., the initial post is due by Wednesday of each week and you should post replies to classmates by Friday). If you expect students to respond to classmates, indicate the required number of responses.

Example:

You will post to the assigned forum on the discussion board each week of the semester. Your initial post is due by Midnight on Wednesday of each week. You should plan to respond to your classmates Thursday - Saturday. The forum will close at Midnight on Saturday of each week. Instructions for each forum will be posted in the forum but you should expect to see a mixture of individual and group postings with specific requirements for how many responses to classmates are necessary for full credit. Read the instructions carefully so you don't lose points for omissions.

You might be interested in reading [Descriptive Criteria for Student Participation](#), one of the Promising Practices resources found on [TWU ID](#), a set of resources for TWU distance educators.

Communicate your Expectations for the Discussion Board

Students do not automatically understand the type and quality of posting you require for the discussion board. It is helpful to provide models of acceptable and unacceptable posts. Be sure to provide supporting rationale so students can begin to critique their own posts and modify these posts toward your models. Rubrics are probably the easiest way to grade postings. Once you have set the standards for quality, translate these into a rubric that is shared with students. This makes the assessment process transparent because it allows students to see the standards before the posting.

Example:

Class participation is important for this course. You are expected to offer comments, questions, and replies to the discussion prompts that have been posted for each module as well as to classmate postings. You are expected to actively participate in each module's discussion each week throughout the semester. My role is as an observer and facilitator. I will be reading all messages and I will participate in the discussion as appropriate.

Evaluation of Required Posts: Postings will be evaluated on the quality of the postings and the degree that the postings promote discussion with classmates. Participation on 15 boards is required (12 modules, Introductions, Web Sites of Interest, and Journal Articles of Interest) and postings will be evaluated per board on the below scale. The discussion assignment will be worth a total of 45 points.

1 point	2 points	3 points
Minimal response to the prompt.	Posting responds to the prompt but does not stimulate further discussion.	Posting responds to the prompt and stimulates at least one substantial follow-up post.

Example 1 Discussion Board Rubric

Criteria	4 points - Outstanding	3 points - Proficient	2 points - Basic	1 point - Below
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				Expectations
Critical Thought	Content rich; Demonstrates complex insight and analysis	Substantial information; Evidence that some analysis or insight has taken place	Information is commonplace and insufficient; Little evidence of analysis or insight	Information is superficial; No analysis or insight
Connections	Clear connections to past or current events; Substantial evidence of application to real-life situations	Some connections to past or current events; Some evidence of application to real-life situations	Limited connections to past or current events; Limited evidence of application to real-life situations	No connections to past or current events; No evidence of application to real-life situations
Uniqueness	Many new ideas; Many new connections; Shows depth and detail	Some new ideas; Some new connections; Shows some depth and detail	Few new ideas; Few new connections; Shows little depth and detail	No new ideas; No new connections; No depth and detail
Style	No grammatical errors; No spelling errors	A few grammatical errors; A few spelling errors	More than a few grammatical errors; More than a few spelling errors	Considerable grammar errors; Considerable spelling errors

Example 2 - Discussion Board Rubric

You might be interested in reading more on [Specific and Descriptive Criteria for Assessment of Student Work](#), one of the Promising Practices resources found on [TWU ID](#).

Teach the Discussion Board

Students do not automatically know the vocabulary of the discussion area. It is worthwhile to educate students about the vocabulary and to provide some practice in using the tools correctly. A little language explaining how to start a thread and how to reply to a thread will make the responses much easier to read and to grade. A thread is one topic and new threads are equivalent to changing the conversation in face-to-face communication. In normal conversation, we have subtle and obvious cues to help us understand these changes - in a discussion forum, the only available cue is the location of threads and replies.

Example:

The discussion board is an area that houses forums. It is in these forums that you will post for credit on the discussion board. A thread is the initial post to the forum and all associated replies to that post. Threads can be thought of as a single topic in a conversation. If you create a new thread, you are changing the topic of the conversation. Sometimes I will require you to post a new thread so I can read and grade individually. At other times, I expect you to reply to a thread started by one of your classmates. You need to learn the difference quickly to be successful in this course.

You might be interested in reading [Reinforce the Vocabulary of the Discussion Board](#), a resource found in the Teaching Tips section of [TWU ID](#), a set of resources for TWU distance educators.

Socialize to the Discussion Board

It is important to design some initial activity to get students to write and share on the discussion board. Not only does this provide practice but it is the first step toward teaching students that the discussion area is useful to teaching and learning. Student introductions are a good choice to get students to begin to post and to respond to their classmates. We also suggest that you create a forum that allows students to share interesting URLs or journal articles (consider providing a small amount of extra credit for those who post material to share). You should also create a student lounge or Cyber Cafe for students to discuss issues unrelated to course content.

Example:

Each of you is required to introduce yourself to the class. After you complete your introduction, I expect you to respond to every post about your introduction. You will have one week to complete this assignment.

Here are the requirements for the introduction:

1. Name and current position
2. One sentence about what you expect to learn from this course (What do you want to know?).
3. One sentence about how you learn best (Think back to something that you learned and reflect on the process you used to learn this).
4. One paragraph pointing out what you find interesting about yourself (What makes you the person you are at this point in your life?).

You might be interested in reading, [Socializing Students to the Discussion Board](#), a resource found in the Teaching Tips section of [TWU ID](#).

Managing Discussion Boards - General

1. Develop a regular schedule to read, respond, and/or grade posts to forums. This will norm students to expect a regular cycle of communication and grading from you.
2. Develop several boards to handle routine questions and issues within the course. Your goal is to "write once and have it read by many."
3. Let students know if you will be unavailable from the board due to travel or other issues.
4. Learn the options available for each forum you develop. If you enable anonymous posts and then try to assign grades, it will cause you some problems. Spend some time reading through the options. If you see something you don't understand, call your instructional designer and they can explain how this will affect your outcome for a particular forum.
5. Share grading rubrics and standards with students.

To read more on this topic, go to [Managing Discussion Boards](#). This resource will discuss some tips for using tools within the discussion board area for reading, replying, and grading.

Techniques to Reduce Instructor Posts

Not every discussion forum requires you to respond individually to each student. Not every learning outcome you design will benefit from individual responses to each student. Our approach is to suggest that you should think carefully about what you are trying to achieve with your posts and then build a schedule of response types that you will use throughout the semester. If you intend to use your posts to provide reinforcement to individual students, this dictates a forum for individual posts from you. If your intent is to clarify misconceptions, a summary of the posts of the students might be a better choice. If you have a large number of students, moving students into groups and requiring one response from each group will rapidly reduce the number of required responses from you. It is also quite acceptable to read a certain number of forums and not respond at all.

We encourage you to learn several different response techniques and then match these techniques to particular forums. Not only will this provide variety to the types of responses you develop but it can be used to reduce the amount of required responses that you create. We do believe it is important to communicate your intentions to students so they do not expect a response from you when it will not be coming (or will be in a format that is unfamiliar), due to the design of the response type.

Our belief is that you mix-and-match these approaches to manage workload while firmly establishing instructor presence in the course. We do not encourage the exclusive use of any one strategy throughout the course. It is the diversity of approaches that allow you to point out different concepts and points in different ways that we believe have value.

[Managing the Discussion Board for Large Sections](#) covers five response strategies that we believe will help you manage the discussion board.

A Comparison Using Varied Management Strategies

The following is a comparison of the total amount of posts by an instructor using different discussion board management approaches. For these examples, assume a class of 20 students with 15 required forums.

1 response to all students for all forums	300 responses per semester
1 response to initial post and 1 response to a reply for all forums	600 responses per semester
1 response to all X 3,5 group posts, 5 summaries, 2 lurks	70 responses per semester
1 response to all X 5,5 group posts, 5 summaries	110 responses per semester
1 response to all X 7,5 group posts, 3 summaries	148 responses per semester

Various Management Strategies

As you can quickly see, using management approaches radically alters the number of posts. This mix-and-match approach should allow you to establish a strong instructor presence without requiring an excessive amount of posts. There is no magic formula for this approach but we do encourage you to let students know the types of responses they should expect to receive from you.

Conclusion

This ends this mini-course. We do hope you found some of these ideas useful and apply them to your courses. Please let us know how they worked for you.

- [Keys to Facilitating Successful Online Discussions](#)
- [The Art of Hosting good Conversations Online](#)
- [Crafting Questions for Online Discussions](#)
- [\(My\) Three Principles of Effective Online Pedagogy by Bill Pelz](#)